

Libya's UN-backed government reclaims key town near Tripoli

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Libya's U.N.-backed government took back a strategic town near Tripoli from a Libyan commander whose forces have been fighting for the past three months to capture the country's capital, with a government spokesman saying Thursday their fighters were in full control of the town.

The taking of Gharyan, about 100 kilometers (62 miles) from Tripoli, is significant because it had served as a key supply route for the forces of commander Khalifa Hifter.

In April, Hifter's self-styled Libyan National Army from eastern Libya and loyal to a rival, east-based government, launched the offensive on Tripoli, setting off fierce fighting that has threatened to plunge Libya into another bout of violence on the scale of the 2011 conflict that ousted longtime dictator Moammar Gadhafi.

"I officially confirm that all of Gharyan is under our control," Col. Mohamed Gnono told The Associated Press over the phone from Tripoli. "The operation was carried out with the least losses and in less than 24 hours."

He did not elaborate beyond saying that an unspecified number of locals from the town's population had collaborated with the government forces to ensure "the success of the operation".

A statement from the government forces late Wednesday first announced the fall of Gharyan, saying they will pursue their campaign to push back Hifter "until the aggressors are purged from all areas."

Hifter's offensive on Tripoli has been widely criticized by the U.N. and aid agencies. Hundreds have been killed so far in the violence, mainly combatants but also civilians, and thousands have been displaced. Earlier this week, the World Health Organization said the toll of the fighting around Tripoli had reached 739 killed and 4,407 wounded.

Hifter, backed by key regional players including Egypt, the United Arab Emirates and Saudi Arabia, claims the push on Tripoli seeks to free the city of radical militias.

For its part, the U.N.-backed government has accused Hifter of trying to establish a one-man military dictatorship.

Later Thursday, The Libyan National Army posted a statement on Facebook denying their rivals were in full control of Gharyan and claiming there was still some fighting underway. "We faced treason from certain people" in the town, Gen. al-Mabrouk al-Ghazawy was quoted as saying about the LNA's losses.

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Libya sunk into chaos after Gadhafi's ouster and is now divided between two administrations — the weak U.N.-backed government in Tripoli and a rival, east-based government that has Hifter's forces on its side — and an array of militias affiliated with either side and fighting over territory.

Hifter's campaign against Islamic militants across Libya in recent years won him growing international support from world leaders who say they are concerned the North African country has turned into a haven for armed groups, and a major conduit for migrants bound for Europe.

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